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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that if the teaching of theory is to be liberatory rather than alienating, the process of theorizing and theory writing needs to be demystifed. To do this, the paper first describes a personal experience that set the course of an educator's life--her learning of English (taught to her by her father)"in China. The paper then discusses the impression that Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" made on her (and the reaction that it elicited) during her first semester of Ph.D. studies at the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages, as well as the impression made by articles by Mike Rose and J. Elspeth Stuckey. Next, the paper reflects on the experience of teaching "repeating" students and the parallels with the home schooling the educator received from her father. Finally, the paper considers theory writing as transforming the past into the future, commenting on Michel Foucault's "Discipline and Punish," his investigation of the coercive and permeating power of institutions and the academic disciplines, and considering Foucault against her own experiences as a student. The paper concludes that theory writing depends more than anything else on lived experiences; it consumes a complex process of experiencing and re-experiencing, reflecting and re-reflecting, questioning, resisting, investigating, encountering others, shaping and reshaping, and transforming the past experiences into a process of becoming. (Contains 9 references.) (NKA)

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Theory Writing as Becoming: Past Experiences Thrice-Lived

Given the prestigious status of theory in the academy and the aura surrounding it, questions concerning theory and theorizing have attracted more attention in recent years as more and more students are pursuing graduate studies in composition and rhetoric. On the one hand, we have Kurt Spellmeyer's warning against the potential harm theory can do to our field: "Theory can intimidate through the force of its sheer complexity;" it can "pulverize the reader's everyday life-world" (68); it "can turn experts into the greenest novices, and novices into superstars overnight" (69); and it can cause us to lose trust in ourselves and to turn to the one who knows better, who is smarter, more savvy, better read than we are (70). Theory, according to Spellmeyer, "at least within the confines of English studies, has principally served to reinstate the authority of an elite" (76).

Gary Olson, on the other hand, argues that the activity of theorizing, not theory with a capital T, is indispensable to the development of the discipline and the formation of the disciplinary identity because to theorize about writing is to "challenge received notions of writing, of composition itself, to move away from a discourse of mastery and assertion toward a more dialogic, dynamic, open-ended, receptive, nonassertive stance" (59). While both arguments are insightful and important for us to heed, I believe that a more rigorous

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investigation of how theory gets written and what happens in the process of theorizing will be more productive. If I want my teaching of theory to be liberatory rather than oppressive, generative rather than inhibiting, empowering rather than alienating, I need to demystify the process of theorizing and theory writing. And what can be a better way than describing my own writing process?

Before I wrote my dissertation, like many others I had been intimidated by Stanley Fish and his like. Fish thinks and writes while watching television. "I've always been able to do it," Fish told his interviewer about his writing process. "To this day when I reread something I've written I can remember what television program I was watching when I wrote it. I remember once when I was in Madrid and went to the bullfights, I wrote a passage about Book Six of *Paradise Lost*; every time I look at it I remember that I was watching the bullfights when I wrote it" (46).

I don't doubt the truth of Fish's story; I just want to contrast his story with my own. For unlike Fish, to this day when I read what I have written, I only remember the happenings I experienced that generated the passion and desire to write, the feeling of confusion, frustration, and resistance when I encountered esoteric theories, the toil and sweat, the sleepless nights, the endless hours of reading and rereading, writing and rewriting interspersed with rare moments of epiphany, infrequent sparks of insight, and occasional visitations of inspiration. What I have written somehow always reminds me of the boundless rice paddies in the Chinese countryside with rows after rows after rows of ricelings transplanted with bare hands. Even the feelings of stiffness in the back and the numbness in the fingers are similar, writing and transplanting ricelings. My story of writing is nothing like Fish's. But that is my point: One

able to write like Fish, but one doesn't have to be like Fish to write and theorize.

The unfortunate part of writing theory is that you may put all your heart into writing and theory still comes out dry, detached, impersonal, passionless, and often incomprehensible. For example, Nedra Reynolds observes in a review essay of my book–a revised version of my dissertation--that

> Gale's own prose reflects the same tension between revolutionary content and traditional form: in fact, one of the few disappointing features of this book for me is "the overall 'passionlessness" of Gale's style. For such a powerful book in its content and the importance of its contribution, I wish Gale had argued her case with far more fire or zeal. She criticizes radical educators for depending too much on passion and personality to impress students, but does that mean we shouldn't express any? (104)

Reynolds' observation reminds me that, when the manuscript was going through the peer review process, one of the reviewers, unable to tell my gender from my name and tired of using "he/she" and "the author" after several sentences, opted for the masculine "he" to refer to me throughout the written comments. Evidently, in my theory, not only is passion obliterated but the voice is regendered. Thus, despite my very different experiences and writing process, my theory voice sounds perhaps not so different from Fish's: a masculine voice. And here I can sympathize with Spellmeyer's objections to theory with its ubiquitous authority of masculinity and lifelessness. It becomes necessary, therefore, for me to find out how my experiences and emotions got lost in my writing. What became of me when I was writing theory? And how did my lived experiences relate to my theory?

I. Narrating: An Experience that Set the Course of My Life

Thirty years ago, in the wake of the Red Guard's beating and torturing of teachers, especially teachers of English, my father opened the first page of the first volume of Xu Guozhang, a most popular college textbook series, the equivalent of *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* in today's America, with the announcement:

"You've goofed off long enough. Let me teach you English at home until schools are back to normal again. Who knows when that will be!"

There was no room for negotiation in his voice. And that moment became the most critical moment in my life, as I would come to realize many years later. From that moment on, the endless pronunciation drills and grammar and translation exercises began, with them the battles of willpower between me and my father. How I hated at the time those long evenings! Father would frequently frown over my mistakes. He would ask me to repeat a sentence a dozen times or recite a poem until my tongue got so tired it lost its elasticity and felt like the sterile pad the dentist stuffed in my mouth after he had extracted my tooth. When I had mustered enough courage over a period of time, I would argue boldly with Father that nobody else had to learn English or anything else so why should I? At this, if he was in a bad mood, my father would knock my forehead really hard with his knuckles. The physical pain would then be intensified by the agony over missing all of the fun my peers were having, when, from the open windows and doors my friends' hysterical giggling and shouting of "I got you" reached my ears and wrenched my heart. I would cry and protest:

"I don't want to learn the stupid English! I want to get out of here!"

"You either learn the stupid language or go toil in a stupid textile factory the rest of

your life," Father would reply, more upset. During those long evenings, when Father's desperateness was amplified by his awareness of the futility of fighting fate and my resistance abetted by the revolutionary fervor and chaos surrounding us, the last thing I would imagine was that Father was pushing me on a journey that would finally lead me to America, to what happened in 1996.

Needless to say, an experience like this won't be forgotten easily and, in fact, I have gone back again and again to this most difficult period in my life and looked at it in different ways and from different angles. When in the countryside English enabled me to escape the backbreaking labor in the fields, I remembered my father's guidance and devotion with gratitude. When I suffered humiliation and hopelessness as a teacher of English in a working class secondary school, denied a higher education and therefore any chance of career advancement, I resented Father's insistence that my knowledge of English was worth all that I had to endure. After I was accepted into the most prestigious graduate program in the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages many years later, I would recall my resistance and rebellion with guilt. I would regret that I had fought Father so obstinately. And I would admire his foresight for making me learn on my own when all my friends were squandering their youth away parading in the streets, scratching one another's faces, or flirting with the army officers and soldiers. In short, as time passed by, the importance of my father's English lessons became more and more self-evident. His teaching was fundamental to my literacy development and success. And the extreme measures he took in a time of political and social frenzy--the uncompromising long hours of training and the raised knuckles against my forehead--became

evidence that supported the simple, age-old wisdom: One: No pains, no gains (universal). And two: Filial children come out of discipline and punishment (Chinese).

II. Questioning: Reliving Past Experiences Through the Eyes of Paulo Freire

I read Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* during the first semester of my Ph. D. studies. My first response to the work was a feeling of horror and incredulity: Isn't Freire a dead ringer for Mao Tsetung whose revolutionary ideal had brought Chinese education and culture to near ruins? Isn't America a free and democratic country? So what sense does it make to talk about liberation when oppression doesn't exist? The words in Freire's book sounded ominously similar to Mao's: political consciousness, the oppressor and the oppressed, liberatory teaching and learning, empowering, emancipation, etc. etc. I had had to live with these words for a good part of my life. I had hoped, coming to America, that I would never see them again. Now I was required to study them again for my Ph.D. degree. Angry, I wrote a paper comparing Freire's pedagogy with Mao's, using my own experiences to demonstrate how, under the pretense of liberating the proletariat, Mao turned teachers into the oppressed in society as well as in the classroom. I wrote that, having seen with my own eyes how Mao's revolutionary pedagogy had produced only more illiterates in China, I had lost faith in the self-styled saviors of the oppressed and their promises of liberation and emancipation, be it Mao or Freire. The professor commented sympathetically on my moral rage over the persecution of intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, called attention to my rather cursory reading of Freire's work, and suggested that I revise the paper and submit it to a journal for publication.

The purgation helped; so did the professor's encouragement. Then one day in class we discussed Mike Rose's article, "The Language of Exclusion," and J. Elspeth Stuckey's *The Violence of Literacy*. At first, I resisted Stuckey's interpretation of a child's hand trembling when learning how to write as indicating the suffering caused by literacy. I thought, "No pains, no gains. There's simply no other way of learning how to write with a pen but to hold a pen and write." Then something happened. The child's image somehow merged with the images of the thirteen students--"repeaters," as they were called--I had taught the year before. At the time I was a TA at an almost all white suburban university. It was a sheer piece of bad luck that, in a class of twenty students, I ended up with thirteen "repeaters," most of whom had failed the exit exam once, some twice, and one three times. They were required to take the same course over until they passed the exam.

I had forgotten, or tried to forget, the distress and anxiety I felt every time I entered the classroom to face a wall of passivity and non-responsiveness. I worked diligently in and out of class with each of them on their papers (who knows how many teachers had read them in despair), became sick with severe sinus infections, succeeded in helping eight of the thirteen repeaters to pass the department's exit exam, and received in return the coldest evaluations I had seen in my life. "She is strict," that was all they would say about my numerous individual conferences with them throughout the semester.

Reflecting on the experience, I for the first time saw that my repeating students might well have been the excluded and the oppressed in the academy, victims of the violence of mainstream literacy. This recognition made me look back at my own home schooling experience in a new light. I suddenly realized that my memory of my father's dark frowns and

frightening knuckles was not the complete picture. How about the stories of Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, and Romeo and Juliet Father told me and my siblings behind closed doors on those winter nights, he acting out each character to achieve the maximum of the dramatic effect? Then on those long evenings my mother was always there, ready to come to sit by my side when I needed a pat on the head, a word of encouragement, or a break from my father's lessons. My younger sister was my loyal reader, who would wait patiently every day for me to finish my translation exercises. She would revel in my Chinese translation of a short story by O'Henry, Maupassant, or Mark Twain or an excerpt from *Oliver Twist*, *Madam Bolvary, or Anna Karenina*. She would reread the stories in Chinese to her friends and come back beaming in pride, kissing me on the cheek.

Talking about the exclusion of language, I remembered another incident. Father and mother would talk in English about things they didn't want us children to know, excluding us from their conversation. Then one day they noticed that I was listening and comprehending what they were talking about, my facial expressions betraying me. No words can describe the gratification I felt upon seeing the surprise in their eyes and smiles on their lips.

But did my repeating students feel the same gratification in my class? Did I create any pleasurable moments like those I had experienced listening to Shakespeare's tales? Did I make writing a rewarding experience that made them feel proud of themselves? Did I encourage them enough? As I relived my past, for the first time I came to see the power relations in the pedagogical context and their effects on teaching and learning. In my father's tutoring session, he the teacher had power over me the student, and I could have been oppressed by his authority had it not been for my mother's interference and my own resistance. In my

composition class with thirteen repeaters, I the teacher had the authority and my repeating students were powerless, labeled by the institution as "repeaters," a synonym of substandard or failure. But in this case the power relations were more complex. Being a TA, my authority in the classroom was limited, for not only did I have to obey the department's mandate of exit exam, but I had to adopt the department's syllabus, teaching philosophy, and schedule for my classes. There was very little room for flexibility and autonomy in my teaching. And both my students and I were struggling with the exclusive power of the academy in order to fit in. Looking back, I began to see that teaching was way more complex than I had thought it to be, even though I was still reluctant to interpret any of my experiences in terms of oppression and exclusion. I began to be interested in the teacher-student relations in the classroom and the power relations in the institutional context. I began to generalize from my lived experiences certain patterns and principles that I could use later, so I would teach better if I ever faced a similar group of students again. My memory of my Father's English lessons became less personal and emotional as I became aware of the complex factors surrounding my home schooling experience. For the first time I stepped out of the confines of the classroom and saw teaching in terms of social justice and equality. As a writer, having lived the past experiences twice and questioned them, I was one step away from personal writing and one step toward theory writing. I was already theorizing.

III. Shaping and Reshaping: Theory Writing as Transforming the Past into the Future

Reading Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* for the first time, I wanted to yell back at him: "What the hell are you talking about?" I was writing my dissertation while

teaching part time at an urban commuter university in the south. My first impulse was to put the book aside and forget about Foucault. Then I thought of borrowing: after all, terminologies such as "docile bodies" "surveillance," and "panopticism" were afloat everywhere, and some major composition scholars were translating Foucault in their scholarship. An efficient use of time would be to recycle what others had said with a little paraphrase here and there. I needed to finish my dissertation so I could have a full time job.

But after Marcia Vale I couldn't possibly do this. Dr. Marcia Vale, the awe-inspiring British professor specializing in Elizabethan drama and literary theory, was the first and the only person who ever put a C+ on my paper when I was studying British and American literature in Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages. The first semester in the Master's program, I wrote my first literary criticism paper on *Gulliver's Travels*, twenty-seven pages long, and I was confident that it would be another A paper. I had searched thoroughly in all the libraries on campus for references on the novelist and the novel. I had read all of them and paraphrased the relevant passages. I had organized the critics' views in a clear and coherent manner. I had handwritten the rough draft and typed it out on a typewriter. In short, I had put a tremendous amount of effort and work into this paper to impress the professor. To show her that I knew what other critics had said about the novel. To make sure that I did not misunderstand the novelist's intentions and meanings. I was proud of the product.

A week later, the paper was returned with the comments that burned into my memory forever: "You've made valid points in this paper, but the information you present is easily accessible to your reader in the library. It would be a better use of your time to read the novel closely and discuss it as you do on page 15." I turned to page 15 and found a marginal

comment: "This comes closest to what I deem a thoughtful reading of the text and fine criticism." That was the only passage she liked, and that was the only passage written in my own words after I had lost sleep thinking hard about why I didn't agree with a critic's interpretation of the chapter about Yahoos and Houyhnhnms. Four literary courses with Professor Marcia Vale taught me that the surest way was to read the primary texts myself and to suffer insomnia if I want to write anything worth others' as well as my own while. I picked up Foucault again and started with Section One of Part Three--Docile Bodies--a subject that I thought I could relate to through my experiences in the academic world.

What personal experiences motivated Foucault's investigation of the coercive and permeating power of institutions and the academic disciplines? The answer was and still is unclear to me. At the time, I wanted to see how the teacher's authority was related to the authority of the institution and the dominant discourse, and how the relations among them influence the power dynamics and the teaching of writing in the classroom. Foucault described disciplines and institutions as functioning mainly to produce docile bodies through control and surveillance, through what he described as panopticism. Reading Foucault against my own experiences, I felt the desire to refute him. I thought of the paralyzed institutions of education and research during the Cultural Revolution and the lost legitimacy of academic discourse. I thought of my father's struggle to teach his children at home when the whole society was sneering at learning, culture, discipline, institution, and knowledge. I thought of the state that took over all the power in the absence of the power and authority of the academic institution. I thought of the state that turned its citizens into unthinking mobs and violent political animals. For a third time, I lived through those days when I was fourteen: I heard my friends' silly

giggling and saw their wanton flirtations with the officers and soldiers. They could have been in school and I could have been in school, learning something useful for our future. My father and mother could have trained more English teachers. My father wouldn't have had to knuckle me, for in school I had always been a top student. And all my friends wouldn't have had to be factory workers or office clerks, semi-illiterates all their lives.

No, I couldn't see eye to eye with Foucault. Foucault's theory was not good for me, or not good enough for me. I had to write something that would reflect my thirty years of learning, teaching, struggling, thinking, and feelings. I had to write something that would show me that I would be able to be a better teacher and learner in the years to come. I needed to explain why the authority of my father, Marcia Vale, Paulo Freire, and Foucault was indispensable in my intellectual growth and why my resistance against their authority was equally important in my becoming a teacher and writer. And I also needed to acknowledge the importance of my mother's nurture and encouragement, my younger sister's eagerness and admiration, my father's telling and acting out of Shakespearean drama, and my many professors' demonstrated interest in my work as well as their frank criticism of it and their disagreement with me. So I was writing. And I was writing theory.

When *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom* was written, I was thirty years and an ocean away from the scene where my literacy journey started. In between, I had been moving in and out of the experiential world and the semiotic world and had been formed and reformed as a learner, teacher, and writer. In retrospect, I realize that theory writing depends more than anything else on lived experiences. Theory writing constitutes a complex process of experiencing and re-experiencing, reflecting and re-

reflecting, questioning, resisting, inquiring, investigating, encountering others, shaping and reshaping and transforming the past experiences into a discourse of the future. Theory writing, in the final analysis, is the writing of a submerged story of life's struggle, fear, disappointment, passion, dream and aspirations. It is a process of becoming.

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